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# PARLIAMENTARY INTELLIGENCE OVERSIGHT AND THE CHALLENGES OF ENHANCED EU INFORMATION SHARING: THE CASE OF BULGARIA

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**Abstract.** *Global trends and the ongoing dynamic processes of trans-border security threats necessitate an unprecedented intensification of intelligence sharing among European Union (EU) Member States, which also reflects on the strengthening of parliamentary oversight of intelligence services. These changes require the application of an integral approach to understanding potential risks and threats, in order to increase awareness and the effectiveness of parliamentary control over intelligence agencies. On one hand, enhanced cooperation in information exchange within the EU strengthens collective security, but simultaneously creates significant difficulties regarding the control and accountability of national intelligence services and institutions. This study demonstrates that overcoming these gaps can largely be achieved by increasing their effective monitoring and parliamentary oversight. This article aims to explore the models of parliamentary intelligence oversight and reveal the challenges they face under the conditions of intensive information exchange within the EU. A special focus is placed on Bulgarian parliamentary practice and its institutional framework. Through the case of Bulgaria, the article examines and reveals the paradoxes of parliamentary control in light of international obligations and requirements for democratic transparency. The research results indicate that current oversight models lag behind the networked nature of contemporary intelligence cooperation. Proposals are made to strengthen inter-parliamentary cooperation within the EU through information-sharing agreements.*

**Keywords:** parliamentary control, intelligence oversight, national security, information sharing, democratic accountability European Union, Bulgaria.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, security and intelligence cooperation within the EU has undergone a fundamental transformation. European security and intelligence are facing serious challenges from emerging risks and threats. These ongoing changes require the application of an integral approach to understanding potential risks and threats, increasing the effectiveness of oversight, and strengthening the exchange of intelligence information.

The issue of intensive intelligence sharing and parliamentary oversight of intelligence has become exceptionally topical due to several key reasons:

The rise of hybrid threats, transnational terrorism, and complex cyberattacks has forced EU member states to shift from "traditional isolationism" toward a model of "intelligence pluralism". This transformation in information sharing has outpaced the legal and institutional frameworks designed to ensure democratic accountability. Within the EU, the process of networking intelligence operations is increasingly accelerating, yet at the national level, their oversight remains fragmented. This has led to the emergence of a so-called "accountability gap". Consequently, shared intelligence often remains beyond the reach of national parliamentary committees, largely due to strict protocols regarding secrecy.

Accelerated technological progress and expanded capabilities for surveillance and control. Digital and information technologies provide intelligence services with vast opportunities for obtaining, processing, analyzing, and transmitting information (Stankov, V. H. 2025a, p. 161-180). The introduction of artificial intelligence allows for the rapid processing and analysis of large databases while ensuring more secure protection.

Democracy, transparency, and the protection of civil rights and liberties. Security in contemporary society is predicated upon democratic values, fundamental rights and freedoms, and equal opportunities for personal development (Updated National Security Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2018). There is an increasing demand for transparency and accountability across all state institutions within the national security sector. The activities of intelligence services must comply with legal frameworks and constitutional principles (Stankov, V. H. 2024, p. 110-114). Democratic societies increasingly call for security sector reforms that ensure greater transparency, accountability, and the effective operation of intelligence agencies.

International cooperation and interaction within the EU, along with the necessity of intelligence sharing, are increasing (Georgiev, V. 2025, p. 58-63). The escalation of global threats objectively necessitates closer international cooperation and synergy between intelligence services, as well as an intensified exchange of intelligence information. This places new demands on national legislatures for the oversight and accountability of intelligence agencies and institutions.

In this context, Bulgaria presents a compelling case study. As an EU frontier state and a relatively new member of the Schengen Area, the country is integrated into European standards and the EU security architecture. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian Parliament faces significant structural and political challenges in overseeing the manner in which national agencies process and protect shared intelligence.

This article aims to examine the model of parliamentary intelligence oversight by identifying the fundamental challenges arising from the intensification of information exchange within the EU, with a specific focus on Bulgarian parliamentary practice. The research thesis posits that the effectiveness of parliamentary control and intelligence accountability is of key importance for strengthening the role of intelligence sharing in the EU, as well as for modernizing the mechanisms of parliamentary oversight and the democratic accountability of intelligence services.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology is aligned with its objective and the supported research thesis. In the course of the study, an interdisciplinary approach is applied, combining the legal framework with institutional analysis.

The methodology is structured around three primary pillars:

- Comparative Analysis: An examination of the EU legal framework (specifically the Treaty on European Union and relevant regulations, such as Regulation (EU) 2022/991 of the European Parliament and of the Council regarding Europol (Regulation (EU) 2022/991 of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2022 ) cooperation, the European Security Strategy (European Security Strategy, 2009) and the NATO Strategic Concept (NATO Strategic Concept, 2022)), alongside Bulgarian national legislation (the Constitution, statutes, the Law on the Management and Functioning of the National Security System (Management and Functioning of the National Security Protection System Act, 2015), sub-legislative acts, the Rules of Organization and Procedure of the National Assembly (Rules of Organization and Procedure of the National Assembly, 2017), parliamentary documents, minutes, resolutions, strategic, and international documents); comparative analysis (comparison of intelligence oversight models within the EU); legal analysis (normative analysis of legislation, analysis of case law, and comparative legal research); systems analysis (revealing the links, relations, and interactions between the elements of the legislative and intelligence systems).

- Case Study Analysis: A focused study of the Bulgarian parliamentary committee for the oversight of security services. This includes a review of public annual reports on the state of national security, legislative debates, and institutional interactions, aimed at identifying practical difficulties and barriers to parliamentary oversight, as well as obstacles to the international exchange of intelligence.
- Qualitative Analysis: An evaluation of the "third-party rule" and its application within EU intelligence-sharing networks. The study assesses the relationship between the "need-to-know" principle (operational effectiveness) and the "need-to-control" principle (democratic accountability).

The application of these research methods and approaches allows for an examination of the systemic gaps in parliamentary oversight, enabling the identification of key challenges within the EU information exchange process and the formulation of evidence-based recommendations for reform.

## 3. LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT OF INTELLIGENCE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Legislative oversight of intelligence within the EU does not adhere to a single, unified model. Each Member State maintains its own distinct system (Bakalov Y.I., Bahchevanov G. 2025, p. 37-50), the architecture of which is built upon the national Constitution, legal system, and political culture. Despite the absence of a uniform model, there are common principles and approaches within the EU, which include:

National Responsibility: The primary responsibility for overseeing national intelligence services lies with the parliaments of the respective Member States. In most EU countries, specialized parliamentary committees are established for intelligence oversight. Generally, these committees possess mandates in three key areas: legislative (defining the mandate and legal framework of the services); budgetary (approving and monitoring funding); and oversight (reviewing reports and investigating instances of violations of fundamental rights and duties).

Shared Responsibility: There exists an effective mechanism for democratic oversight based on the principle of shared responsibility among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches.

Legal Framework: Each Member State establishes a clear and comprehensive legal framework that defines the mandate and powers of the intelligence services while guaranteeing the fundamental rights of citizens.

International Parliamentary Cooperation and Oversight within the EU (Wills, A., & Vermeulen, M. 2011, p. 64-67): There is an intensifying cooperation between national services and EU bodies, aimed at establishing more effective oversight at the European level and coordination among individual services. Due to growing asymmetric threats, the radicalization of terrorist activities, organized crime, and the potential use of nuclear weapons, special attention must be paid to strengthening cooperation and oversight of information exchange among the intelligence services and institutions of Southeast European countries (Bakalov, Y. I. 2022, p. 10-41). In this regard, analysis indicates that countries in this region, which have recently transitioned from totalitarian regimes to democracy, require a reformation of their intelligence oversight models. Of particular importance is the necessity to implement contemporary parliamentary control mechanisms and instruments equivalent to those applied in EU member states with established democratic systems. This facilitates the creation of a legal framework that allows intelligence services to evolve into modern structures for policy implementation and intelligence sharing, thereby strengthening security and the protection of civil society.

Diversity of Approaches: The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024) distinguishes five different models of oversight frameworks across the Member States, reflecting a wide variety of approaches. These diverse models include specialized parliamentary committees composed of members from different parliamentary groups. For instance, such committees are established within the Parliaments of Bulgaria and Germany. Some models incorporate expert bodies appointed by Parliament, which may include external experts or members of

the judiciary. Belgium and the Netherlands serve as prominent examples of this approach. Furthermore, hybrid models exist, representing a combination of parliamentarians and independent experts.

Specialized Bodies: Within national parliaments, specialized parliamentary committees are established for the purpose of oversight. These committees include experts who are granted the requisite authorization for access to classified information.

Although the European Parliament lacks direct powers to oversee national intelligence services, it exercises oversight over EU agencies with intelligence-related functions, such as Europol, Frontex, and EU INTCEN. The Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) (Activity report, 2019-2024) operates within the European Parliament, primarily monitoring the protection of citizens' fundamental rights and data privacy. Intelligence agencies are mandated to provide information to Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) through briefings and various hearing formats, subject to appropriate security clearances.

Horizontal and technological oversight is expected to be strengthened, with the legislative framework focusing on emerging threats. The Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act) is slated to become operational starting in 2026. This is necessitated by the fact that AI systems are increasingly categorized as high-risk. Consequently, there are growing requirements for transparency regarding the utilization of these systems by public authorities.

With respect to data protection, EU legislation imposes specific directives on law enforcement authorities to ensure rigorous oversight of the manner in which agencies process personal data. Furthermore, the establishment of a European Intelligence Unit, to be led by the European Commission, is currently under discussion. The objective is to achieve enhanced coordination and a more robust analysis of threats.

In international intelligence cooperation within the EU, the "third-party rule" (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017) is established as a fundamental principle. According to this rule, intelligence information received from a partner country cannot be shared with a third party without prior negotiation and the explicit consent of the original source. From the perspective of democratic oversight, this rule limits the ability of parliamentary committees to verify information obtained from foreign services (Born, H. and Leigh, I., 2005). To overcome these constraints, international intelligence cooperation is most frequently based on agreements that focus on thematic data and specific techniques. This primarily pertains to operational cooperation, the exchange of classified information, and coordinated actions in the fight against terrorism, among others.

Information exchange and cooperation are becoming increasingly imperative in the field of cybersecurity (FRA, Surveillance by intelligence services: fundamental rights safeguards and remedies in the EU, 2017). For this reason, EU Member States are paying special attention to cybersecurity and defense. Legislative priorities in these areas focus on strengthening European defense and security through closer cooperation and new legislative measures and initiatives.

With a view to achieving a higher level of cybersecurity within the EU, Bulgaria has undertaken legislative measures in alignment with the European NIS 2 Directive (Directive (EU) 2022/2555) (Directive (EU) 2022/2555 of the European Parliament,2022). These measures are being implemented through extensive amendments to the Cybersecurity Act (Cybersecurity Act, 2026). New standards are being introduced in four primary areas: risk management, whereby business organizations are mandated to develop programs featuring specific organizational and technical measures and oversight policies; incident reporting, involving rigorous control through a three-stage model for notifying authorities in the event of cyber threats and incidents; and corporate accountability, where the management of business entities bears personal responsibility for the adoption and monitoring of measures aimed at achieving cyber resilience. These legislative changes aim to ensure Bulgaria’s sustainable integration into the pan-European framework for information exchange and the protection of network and information environments.

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## 4. PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT OF INTELLIGENCE IN BULGARIA

An integral part of the national security and intelligence system in Bulgaria is the question of the current model of oversight and accountability. Figure 1 presents a graphical model of the system for the control and protection of national security and intelligence. Each of the elements within the system possesses its own legally defined powers, activities, and accountability mechanisms, which ensures the fulfillment of national security and intelligence protection functions. In view of achieving the research objective, we provide a more detailed analysis of the mechanisms and instruments for intelligence oversight exercised by the legislative branch.

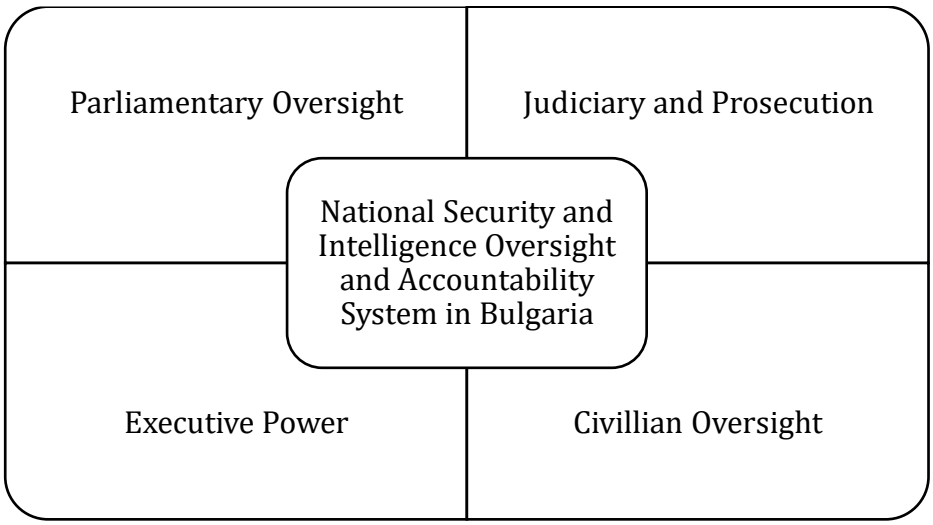


Figure 1. The national security and intelligence oversight and accountability system in Bulgaria

The legislative power in the Republic of Bulgaria is vested in the National Assembly. The National Assembly also exercises parliamentary oversight (Art. 62. (1) Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991). The parliamentary oversight of intelligence services and structures constitutes a vital component of the democratic system of control and accountability. This oversight is conducted by Parliament through specialized mechanisms and instruments, the primary aim and objective of which are to regulate the legality of the activities and functions of intelligence services in carrying out the intelligence process, while strictly adhering to the principles of national security.

Legislative authority and the oversight of intelligence services are exercised on the basis of constitutional principles, the separation of powers, and parliamentary democracy.

Article 105 of the Constitution stipulates the powers of the Council of Ministers in the field of national security and subjects it to parliamentary oversight (Art. 105. (1) Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991).

The oversight of intelligence services is of pivotal importance for maintaining a balance between conducting effective intelligence operations and ensuring the protection of democratic principles, as well as the rights and freedoms of civil society (Stankov, V. H. 2025b, p. 13-18).

In the sphere of security and intelligence, democratic oversight serves as a fundamental principle of the rule of law. It acts as a reliable guarantee that national security and intelligence agencies operate within legally established regulations, rules, and procedures.

For Bulgaria, amid escalating threats from military conflicts, terrorism, extremism, migratory pressure, and instability, legislative oversight of the intelligence services acquires particular significance for building public trust and confidence within civil society.

The model of parliamentary oversight mechanisms includes a specialized standing Committee on Oversight of the Security Services, the Application and Use of Special Intelligence Means, and the Access to Data under the Electronic Communications Act.

The activities of the Committee are conducted in accordance with the Constitution, the Rules of Organization and Procedure of the National Assembly, and the prevailing legislation (Committee on Oversight of the Security Services, 2017). The Committee exercises parliamentary oversight over the operations of the security services. This oversight pertains to the protection of classified information, the safeguarding of citizens' rights and freedoms, and the prevention of the unlawful use of special intelligence means and unauthorized access to data under the Electronic Communications Act. The Committee drafts reports, proposals, and opinions, and adopts positions regarding the annual reports and budgets of the security services.

Parliamentary oversight in Bulgaria encompasses several key institutions. The State Agency for National Security (SANS) conducts intelligence activities aimed at preventing, intercepting, and neutralizing threats and risks to national security. It provides the necessary intelligence information to support executive decision-making within the scope of national security.

The State Intelligence Agency (SIA) is directly subordinated to the Council of Ministers. This agency acquires, analyzes, and provides intelligence to the highest state authorities, as well as to government bodies with the relevant competence regarding the identification and prevention of risks and threats to national security.

Parliamentary oversight of the SIA's activities is exercised by the National Assembly through the standing Committee on Security, by means of monitoring and controlling its operations. However, the Committee does not have access to information regarding specific intelligence operations, nor to data concerning the Agency's employees or cooperating individuals. Furthermore, access to classified information is restricted during the performance of oversight activities concerning the Agency’s operations.

The specialized body for military intelligence in Bulgaria is the Military Intelligence Service. The Service organizes and conducts effective tactical and strategic intelligence, utilizing both technical and human resources to provide information support for the activities of state institutions in the field of national security and defense. Additionally, there are five other structures within the Ministry of Interior that acquire and utilize intelligence information to ensure public order and internal security.

The analysis of the model of legislative oversight and accountability of intelligence in Bulgaria indicates that there are untapped opportunities for its development and refinement. This includes moving toward closer cooperation and interaction among all institutions, bodies, and structures involved in the acquisition and use of intelligence, with the aim of increasing the efficiency and coordination of the intelligence process in Bulgaria.

The consolidation of the intelligence community, along with the legal regulation of the legislative oversight and accountability model over the intelligence process and the activities of intelligence services, is fundamental to the implementation of effective and efficient control over intelligence information for the protection of the national security system.

## 5. CHALLENGES TO PARLIAMENTARY OVERSIGHT ARISING FROM THE INTENSIFICATION OF INTELLIGENCE SHARING

The model of the parliamentary oversight and accountability system should reflect the fundamental values and legal principles inherent to intelligence and security. This is where one of the primary paradoxes of the legislative oversight model emerges: how to effectively oversee intelligence services and institutions whose efficacy is intrinsically linked to intelligence information that is, to a large extent, strictly confidential or classified (Annex No. 1 to Art. 25 of the Protection of Classified Information Act, 2002). In the context of escalating threats from military conflicts and terrorism, it becomes increasingly important to reconceptualize and refine the notion of security and the accessibility of intelligence, viewed through the prism of effective parliamentary control and accountability.

There is a growing critical importance in seeking and developing new opportunities for greater transparency, oversight, and accountability. Insufficient transparency and weak oversight may signal a lowering of requirements for the efficient utilization of the intelligence services' limited resources or indicate an increase in excessive political or economic influence over them. A risk exists regarding the curtailment of democratic oversight and accountability, particularly within the current rapidly changing security environment.

The dynamic shifts within the security environment pose a significant challenge to effective parliamentary oversight. The vast array of emerging issues and problems within the intelligence system—and their resolution through reliance on the regulatory framework, ordinances, rules, and practices of secrecy and information classification—impedes the work of members of parliament. In this regard, it is necessary to increase the utilization of research, specialized expertise, and scientific findings, as well as to engage legal experts and strengthen international cooperation in the field of intelligence and security.

The analysis established that there is no single model of parliamentary oversight that is universally functional and applicable to all EU Member States. Significant diversity exists in the rules, practices, and mandates of national parliaments. The challenge of strengthening parliamentary oversight over the intelligence and security sector serves as a catalyst for seeking greater alignment between the role of Parliament and national security policy, ensuring it meets the needs of civil society and the protection of national sovereignty.

A major challenge to achieving effective parliamentary oversight is the issue of "information asymmetry ". This can be defined as a classic paradox: while intelligence services acquire and possess comprehensive intelligence, members of parliament have access only to information provided to them in compliance with classified information protection requirements.

The established mechanisms for the application and use of special intelligence means, the acquisition of intelligence, and related violations by security services represent another significant challenge within the current model of legislative intelligence oversight. In this regard, a necessary balance must be sought to overcome the "secrecy-conflict "paradox. This paradox most frequently manifests during the processing and utilization of intelligence information. By definition, the legislative branch is public and transparent, whereas security services operate with both secret and classified information.

It is necessary to develop and implement effective mechanisms and instruments aimed at preventing information leaks. A particularly significant risk involves members of parliament, who are public figures working closely with journalists and representatives of the electronic media. In their interactions with the media, parliamentarians may be tempted to gain political dividends by sharing highly specialized information. Upon the identification of such violations, the application of appropriate legal sanctions is essential.

The contemporary, unprecedented challenges associated with hybrid threats, cyberattacks, and the use of artificial intelligence necessitate fundamental changes to the model of legislative intelligence oversight and accountability. Amendments to existing legislation should focus on the refinement and enhancement of administrative capacity.

Increasing the effectiveness of legislative oversight mechanisms and control entails a series of improvements, including new rules for the access and utilization of intelligence information, enhanced accountability and coordination, and the introduction of more effective sanctions.

## 6. CONCLUSION

A comparative analysis of the oversight and accountability models in the EU and Bulgaria demonstrates that the mechanisms and instruments for parliamentary intelligence oversight are an essential component of the broader process of European integration and cooperation among intelligence services. This aligns with best practices in the fields of democratic governance, control, and accountability.

The model of parliamentary intelligence oversight within the EU is diverse and characterized as decentralized. While each Member State maintains its own distinct system, they share a common commitment to ensuring oversight and democratic accountability in compliance with the rule of law.

The globalization of threats necessitates increasingly closer cooperation and the intensification of information exchange among the intelligence services of EU Member States. Consequently, this presents national parliaments with new challenges to strengthen and seek innovative forms of collective security and defense.

Within the framework of the legislative oversight model, security sector reforms are required to ensure a more comprehensive application of the principles of transparency, accountability, and efficiency of intelligence services, while simultaneously preserving their operational capabilities.

The European model of legislative intelligence oversight and accountability demands highly profound and precise work in the acquisition and utilization of intelligence information for the development of effective national security policies.

The applied European model is hybrid in nature, representing a synthesis of a direct democratic model at the national level and normative/budgetary oversight at the EU level over security and intelligence structures. This European model of legislative intelligence oversight facilitates a more efficient allocation of resources and improved management, enabling a swifter response to the dynamics of both internal and external threats.

The primary strengths of European intelligence oversight are manifested in the strong dominance of parliamentary control, robust judicial guarantees for order and legality, specialized institutions for security and the protection of civil society, as well as European integration, the harmonization of various security-related laws, and supranational oversight.

The model of oversight and accountability of the intelligence services in Bulgaria is a complex system of institutions, laws, regulatory acts, procedures, and mechanisms based on democratic principles and aligned with European security standards. A central role within this model is occupied by the specialized parliamentary Committee on Oversight of the Security Services, the Application and Use of Special Intelligence Means, and the Access to Data under the Electronic Communications Act. This parliamentary committee possesses clearly defined mandates and functions.

Despite the significant progress achieved in legislative oversight and accountability in Bulgaria, the analysis indicates that there remain untapped opportunities for more effective implementation of control within intelligence structures and institutions. Additional efforts are imperative to refine the oversight and accountability system in accordance with European standards and international best legislative practices.

The primary directions for the development and refinement of the legislative intelligence oversight and accountability system do not aim to diminish its strength or capabilities. Rather, they serve as a practical prerequisite for enhancing the democratic nature of oversight and accountability, as well as for the improved legitimation and representation of intelligence services' activities before civil society.

Within a democratic state governed by the rule of law, the strength of intelligence services does not imply opacity or a lack of accountability. The implementation of various instruments and mechanisms for the advancement of legislative oversight and accountability must contribute to the strengthening of institutional trust in the interest of civil society.

**AI Use Declaration.** *AI-based tools were used to assist with the translation and language editing of this article from the author's original Bulgarian manuscript into English. The author reviewed and revised the translated text, verified all sources and references against the primary materials, and confirms that the substantive content, analysis, and conclusions are the author's own. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final text.*

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